
**CONCLUSION: KARGIL AND SOUTH ASIAN
STABILITY**

What impact has Kargil had on South Asian stability? This chapter seeks to answer this question briefly by revisiting earlier RAND work on deterrence breakdown in South Asia that was undertaken in 1994.¹ That work argued that in the foreseeable future, South Asia would experience a condition of “ugly stability”—that is, the persistence of unconventional conflicts—because conventional wars of either unlimited or limited aims had become either prohibitively costly or beyond the easy reach of both India and Pakistan for purposes of national policy. Further, owing to the presence of nuclear weapons, India and especially Pakistan would be particularly enticed to engage in various types of subconventional conflicts at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. Previous research thus adjudged war to be unlikely except under certain dramatic changes in the overall power-political balance between India and Pakistan, so the question of whether deterrence could break down merits revisitation in the aftermath of Kargil.

This chapter first summarizes some of the key arguments in support of the claim that “ugly stability” will obtain in the foreseeable future. Second, it explores whether these conclusions still hold in the post-Kargil South Asian environment. It then concludes by identifying several key issues that merit further investigation and research.

¹Ashley J. Tellis, *Stability in South Asia*.

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE AND POSSIBILITIES OF WAR

Earlier RAND research on stability in South Asia argued that pre-meditated *unlimited aims* wars were not likely for at least another decade. Other things being equal, this conclusion was based mainly on the inability of both countries to achieve rapid and decisive victory within a two-to-three-week period, which is the duration of war most relevant to the subcontinent. If a war expanded beyond this time frame, it would become a painful and costly matter of attrition that would eventually redound to India's natural advantages. This is Pakistan's principal military disincentive with respect to initiating an unlimited aims conflict. Although India is not hampered by similar limitations, New Delhi is not favorably inclined to endure the varied costs of a war of attrition today. In any event, political objectives ultimately determine the improbability of unlimited aims wars in South Asia. India currently betrays little interest in subjugating or fractionating Pakistan despite the exasperation often expressed at Pakistani behavior. While some extremists in Pakistan may desire to dismember India, Pakistan simply lacks the capability to pursue this type of goal, at least through the pursuit of wars of unlimited aims.²

In this context, wars of *limited aims* are certainly possible in principle, because each country does have the capability to pursue this type of war. However, these conflicts too were judged to be generally unlikely in practice, in this case because fear of operational failure would interact with the concern that neither side could assure itself (a) that the war would be terminated on demand after the initial success was achieved and (b) that once initiated, the war could in fact be kept limited in aims, means, and consequences throughout the course of the campaign. This is the principal deterrent to limited aims wars, and this conclusion is likely to hold as long as both India and Pakistan have a relative military balance similar to that existing at present and so long as there is no dramatic shift in the regional balance of power.³

The role of nuclear capabilities in maintaining deterrence stability is analytically—though perhaps not “empirically”—unclear, because in

²Ibid., pp. 13–31.

³Ibid., pp. 30–31.

some sense deterrence stability is *overdetermined* by the weak conventional force capabilities of both states, the lack of political incentives to dramatically change the status quo, and the prohibitive costs of conventional warfare when viewed against both countries' economic weaknesses *as well as* their now overt nuclear capabilities. In any event, the destabilizing effects of nuclear capabilities are clearly more apparent and observable in that nuclear weapons have permitted India and particularly Pakistan to prosecute a range of unconventional conflicts at the lower end of the spectrum of violence.⁴

The incentives to prosecute unconventional conflicts in the form of state-supported terrorism or state-supported insurgency will continue to persist, in large part because conventional conflicts remain risky. As a result, South Asia will continue to experience conventional deterrence stability even though this stability will be “ugly” and will entail a high degree of subconventional and unconventional violence.⁵

IMPLICATIONS OF KARGIL FOR “UGLY STABILITY”

Since unlimited aims wars are unlikely for the various political and military reasons summarized above, and since subconventional wars are certain to persist indefinitely (again, for the reasons explored above), the critical question that merits revisitation is whether limited aims wars between India and Pakistan—the prospects of which were generally minimized in previous research except under changes in certain specific boundary conditions⁶—are likely to materialize in the future. If they are, the challenges for stability in South Asia could become quite acute, at least episodically. While subconventional and unconventional wars can entail high levels of violence and are consequently quite problematic, they do not involve an organized application of military force in the way that limited wars invariably do. Organized applications of force bring in their wake the potential for escalation both horizontally and vertically and, as a result, chal-

⁴Ibid., pp. 30–33.

⁵Ibid.

⁶For the circumstances under which limited wars could break out in South Asia, see Ashley J. Tellis, *Stability in South Asia*, pp. 55–59.

lenge stability in a way that subconventional violence and unconventional violence often do not.

The prospect for the outbreak of limited wars in South Asia therefore merits brief examination. How likely is limited aims war in the future? To begin with, it must be recognized that Kargil *was*, in some sense, a limited aims war in that at least one of Pakistan's objectives was to secure territory, however marginal. Of course, its other objective, to internationalize the conflict, was just as salient—if not more so—than these meager territorial ambitions. One of the principal deterrents to initiating limited aims war in South Asia is the inability to assure international intervention and the cessation of hostilities after the achievement of a state's immediate operational aims. As described in earlier chapters, Pakistan did seem to believe that the international community would intervene in a fashion both timely and consonant with Pakistan's strategic interest once it had secured its operational aims early in the conflict. Given this assumption—however flawed it was to begin with—it is no surprise that Pakistan initiated the Kargil war, because the expectation of international intervention leading to a quick termination of hostilities served in effect to remove one of the principal deterrents to the initiation of limited aims wars: the fear that, absent quick, on-demand termination of conflict, the war could spin out of control and degenerate into a major, open-ended campaign that would redound to Islamabad's disadvantage. However, one of the lessons that Pakistan *has* learned from Kargil is that such optimistic expectations of the international community's role in South Asian rivalries are unwarranted. Such a conclusion could deter Kargil-like limited aims wars in the future.

In another sense, however, Kargil can be seen as an example not of a limited aims war (in the conventional sense described in the literature) but, rather, of Pakistan pushing the envelope with respect to LIC. This reading is reinforced by the fact that Islamabad went to great lengths to disguise its participation in the war and to this day has not officially admitted its role in the initiation of the Kargil conflict.⁷ To the degree that Kargil turns out to be an example of a detour in what is otherwise LIC, the explanation for deterrence failure

⁷See Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Jammu Kashmir Dispute," at www.forisb.org/Kashmir.html.

in this event is less complicated, though it does ride on a bewildering number of peculiar assumptions that informed Pakistani decision-making with respect to this event—for example, that the presence of Pakistani forces would not be detected, and that if detected, would have no political consequences; that the Indian response to the Pakistani *fait accompli* would be passive and quiescent; and that the Kargil war would have little real effect on India-Pakistan relations. The cumulative effect of such peculiar assumptions renews the concerns many observers have traditionally had about the character of Pakistani decisionmaking with respect to grand strategy and about the effects of that strategy on strategic stability in South Asia.⁸ Thus, while it is possible to conclude that Pakistan, having learned once again that favorable international intervention and on-demand war termination cannot be assured, is unlikely to initiate a future Kargil-like operation, the uncertainty about whether Pakistan's higher decisionmaking institutions—which, all admit, are relatively weak—can in fact internalize these lessons permanently and institutionally gives rise to legitimate fears that Islamabad (if it chooses to behave like the Bourbon monarchy that reputedly learned nothing and forgot nothing) might be tempted to replicate some facsimile of the Kargil operation in the future.

These fears are only exacerbated by the fact—underscored in this report—that Pakistan's evaluation of the consequences of Kargil is still ambiguous. Had Pakistan concluded that the Kargil operation was an outright failure, the prospects of recurrence would have been minimal. However, Pakistan's lessons learned are more complex. Even as the overall failure of the Kargil operation dominates the consciousness of many Pakistani stakeholders, several important constituencies still tend to rationalize Kargil, even if only as an afterthought, as some sort of a victory. These conceptions of victory—the brilliance of the tactical planning, the effectiveness of Pakistan's operational performance, the conflict as progenitor of India's political dialog with the Kashmiris—differ often as a result of where the constituency is located in Pakistan's state-society structure, but the “residue” of such beliefs implies the possibility that Pakistan might be tempted to carry out Kargil-like operations in the future.

⁸See Ahmad Faruqi, “Failure in Command: Lessons from Pakistan's India Wars,” *Defense Analysis* (forthcoming).

The lingering possibility that future Kargils might arise—however remote that seems at present—is rooted ultimately in the particular dynamics of the current India-Pakistan rivalry in South Asia.

On the Pakistani side of the rivalry, the current regime is impassionedly focused on “resolving” Kashmir, and its support for the insurgency is unlikely to dissipate any time soon—*even though this policy is orthogonal to Pakistan’s current endeavors to address its serious economic problems*. This support serves various purposes:

- Distracting India through the medium of subconventional and unconventional war is seen as bequeathing strategic benefits for Pakistani security.
- Supporting the insurgency has turned out to be a productive strategy for employing local and Afghan Islamists who might otherwise be tempted to turn their revolutionary zeal inward, toward Pakistan.
- The Kashmir insurgency is one of two major issues (the nuclear program being the other) that cement national solidarity and may help to legitimize military rule in the face of continuing weaknesses in the development of Pakistan’s identity.
- A future “diversionary war” could be precipitated by Pakistan’s domestic disarray, which is caused in part by weak institutions, civil-military discord, poor economic performance, and an in-firm civil society.

Finally, Pakistan’s evolving nuclear capabilities might be judged to provide effective strategic cover for an activist Kashmir policy that sanctions episodic limited aims operations if the strategic environment is in fact believed to be conducive to the initiation of such operations.

On the Indian side, New Delhi’s commitment to an internal solution to the Kashmir problem creates greater incentives for Pakistan to assert its equities in the ongoing dispute through means of overt force if necessary. While the Indian conviction about the desirability of an internal solution is rooted in larger beliefs about the liberal, secular, and multiethnic nature of the Indian Union, the unwitting by-product of pursuing such a solution will be an increased resistance

on the part of Pakistan. Precisely because the positions of the two antagonists are in *absolute* conflict—because neither can sacrifice its cherished approach to the problem without subverting other equally critical political goals—the currently reigning condition of “ugly stability” in South Asia may be occasionally punctuated by episodes of “uglier stability” from time to time. In such an environment, a wide variety of Kargil-like operations could occur, each differing in scale, intensity, and consequences. But if all goes well, any such intense and episodic “crisis slide” will gradually recede to the pre-existing condition of ugly stability.⁹

The interplay of these Indian and Pakistani dynamics and the diverging trend lines in the political futures of both countries—a dissatisfied and deteriorating Pakistan vs. a confident and growing India—almost ensures that the India-Pakistan rivalry will persist, and that rivalry alone permits the possibility—however remote—that Pakistan could pursue Kargil-like operations in the future. In fact, a good argument could be made that the Kargil war itself was conditioned at least in part by the growing Pakistani recognition that India is on the verge of becoming the hegemonic state in South Asia: the closing window of opportunity represented by this fact implied the need for dramatic action at a time when the international community still shared a certain sympathy for Pakistan in the aftermath of India’s May 1998 nuclear tests. In any event, even if operations on the scale and intensity of Kargil do not occur in the future, political-military crises in South Asia are likely to surface over the course of the next decade. Until Pakistan pulls out of its current economic morass, institutionalizes a stable set of responsive governing institutions, inculcates a democratic temper, cements a political identity outside of opposition to India, and acts upon the realization that Kashmir, no matter how valuable, is still not as valuable as Pakistan, the resentment, grievances, and dissatisfaction that currently drive Islamabad’s Kashmir and India policies will only compel Pakistan to contemplate future Kargil-like operations, despite the fact that the full range of costs of such operations may grossly outweigh any putative benefits.

⁹Ashley J. Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal*, pp. 131–132.

AREAS REQUIRING FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Three topics requiring further investigation came to the fore in thinking through the possibilities for deterrence breakdown in the long term. The first is Pakistan's inability or unwillingness to control the jihadi elements existing within and immediately outside its territory, and the impact of these groups on Pakistan's civil society and internal security.

The second issue that emerged is the possibilities arising from India's contemplation of "limited war."¹⁰ As thinking about limited war evolves in India, this issue merits further scrutiny. Analysts need to assess and understand the meaning of the concept and its implications for deterrence breakdown, the current state of Indian planning for limited operations, and the doctrinal changes that would be necessitated by the formal adoption of this concept, if this in fact occurs.

The third area is the likelihood that China and the United States will seek to reconfigure their bilateral relations with India. This issue has most import for the longer-term prospects of conventional deterrence breakdown insofar as it affects the incentives for India, Pakistan, and China to contemplate various kinds of dyadic wars.

¹⁰See C. Raja Mohan, "Fernandes Unveils 'Limited War' Doctrine," *The Hindu*, online edition, January 25, 2000; Anthony Davis, "When Words Hurt: No Limits on a 'Limited War'," *Asia Week*, Vol. 26, No. 12, March 31, 2000; George Fernandes, "Dynamics of Limited War," *Strategic Affairs*, online edition, October 15, 2000, available at <http://www.stratmag.com/issueOct-15/page07.htm>. See also V.R. Raghavan, "Limited War and Strategic Liability," *The Hindu*, February 2, 2000.